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Niall Richardson, Surrey and Burlington, Ashgate, 2010, 237 pp., ISBN 9780754676225 (hbk)

Transgressive Bodies is premised on two key points. First, that film, television and the Internet are a modern manifestation of the freak show stage. Performing on the stage of this freak show are transgressive bodies: hyper-muscular, fat, transsexed and disabled. The central thesis of the book and the second part of Richardson's premise are that these bodies are represented in popular media in two ways – first, they are contained or made more socially acceptable. Second, this threat may instead be subject to an eroticization, or (s)exploitation. Mainstream representations tend to contain the transgressive body to present them within a non-threatening, acceptable narrative, whereas some more peripheral texts complicate this containment by placing the transgressive body under an erotic gaze.

Richardson innovates the foundations laid in the analysis of gender, race and sexuality in popular culture by applying them to hyper-muscular, fat, transsexed and disabled bodies. He illustrates the ways they are subjected to an 'en-freakment' by the stylistics of modern media. Just as the miniature mise en scene of the freak show stage created 'the giant', the bodybuilder is constructed as grotesque through an emphasis on disproportionate muscles taking up space on screen and excessive stylizations demonstrates gender as a construction of re-presentation (p. 140). However, this grotesqueness could also be read as a form of resistance (p. 41).

Transgressive Bodies is divided into four parts, with each type of non-normative body being considered across three chapters. In each part, Richardson first sets out to consider the way the transgression surrounding the body under consideration is 'created' through an introduction to academic debates in the area. He then goes on to investigate the ways the threat of the non-normative body is 'contained' and in the final chapter '(s)exploited'. The analysis builds on Bogdan's contention that the freak is a cultural construct, not a characteristic of the individual (p. 5).

Richardson's containment and (s)exploitation framework provides an excellent foundation to make connections between what are disparate transgressive groups, with seemingly little in common. These connections are important because as Richardson suggests anyone who has felt marginalized by the culture in which they are located can identify with the 'freaks' discussed throughout his book (p. 5). This marginalization may be felt by all because as a society we are 'obsessed' with the body:

Turn on the television any night of the week and we are able to find programmes devoted to the body; or more explicitly the regulation and discipline of the body so that it conforms to acceptable standards of beauty. We have programmes telling us how to diet, fashion/dress the body, ornament/ make up the body, exercise/ train the body, manipulate the body's tissues through surgery – in short, all programmes which instruct us about how the body 'should' look. (p. 1)

Often our own bodies do not measure up to these representations. Fat and disabled bodies take on a particular significance in this obsession as we fear fat (p. 75) and cultural prejudice dictate that disabled bodies must be fixed (p. 167). In both cases, social context decides what is considered fat or disabled with changing definitions obvious over time (p. 75) and social context (p. 172). Social definitions of hyper-muscular bodies have also changed over time (p. 33). Similarly, gender theorists have hotly debated the politics of transgenderism and transexuality (p. 123).

The discussion of fat bodies is particularly timely in the current television environment. In 2011, a number of programmes featured fat people including *The Biggest Loser*, *Mike and Molly*, *Huge*, *I Used to be Fat*, *Heavy*, *More to Love*, *Supersize v Superskinny*, *X-rated*, *The Last 10 pounds*, *Big Medicine*, *Ruby*, *Shedding for the Wedding*, *Village on a Diet*, *Too Fat for 15*, *Celebrity Fit Club* (Elser and Stephensen 2011). The majority of these programmes construct fat bodies as transgressive and through weight loss shapes them into a more acceptable form. A loss of control is central to our fear of fat.

Our culture is obsessed with the management and discipline of fat. Yet fat cannot be clearly defined as it is a culturally mutable concept. The anxiety created around fat is related to beauty rather than health (p. 76) with fat often being seen as a feminine issue. Although women are taught to restrict their bodies, men are culturally encouraged to take up space (p. 78). This concept is also of significance for Richardson's analysis of hyper-muscular and transsexed bodies. Female body builders challenge normativity by taking up more space (p. 35), whereas Felicity Hauffman's character in *TransAmerica* performs femininity by attempting to diminish her size (p. 140). Richardson's analysis of the ways fat bodies are contained centres on Hollywood films which represent fake fat including *Shallow Hal* and *Norbit*. Although there is some promise of a more nuanced representation of fat bodies in *Norbit* – Rasputia refuses to accept culture's interpretation of her fatness as unattractive (p. 87) – ultimately fat suits are non-threatening and comedic. *Shallow Hal* by comparison rests on pre-feminist ideals of femininity, as does many representations of transexuality. These pre-feminist ideals work to contain the threat of the transgressive body.

Richardson is critical of *Shallow Hal* for failing to display an awareness of 'chubby chasers or fat admirers' (p. 87) – sub-cultural groups that eroticize fat. Yet, his analysis of the (s)exploitation of fat bodies focuses to a large extent on bodybuilders rather than on fat bodies. Richardson is passionate about the cultural analysis of bodybuilding, and this passion is infectious. However, I felt this chapter was somewhat of a missed opportunity, particularly as fat characters are excluded from enjoying a sex life until they lose weight on popular programmes such as *The Biggest Loser* (Jones 2010).

Richardson's analysis of popular media representations of disability is one of the most up to date I have read. Disability scholars have argued that the ways disability is imagined in the media have not changed in the last 20 years and that new technology, formats and genres only exacerbate the problem of locating disability in the body and not in social practices (Darke 2004). However, these same theorists tend to concentrate on films made in the 1980s (Darke 2010), influenced by the social context of that era. Through his focus on the Farrerly brothers, Richardson explores more recent films to demonstrate the way disability is represented in popular media as a problem with the body rather than the built environment. His focus on documentary in the (s)exploitation chapter is quite revolutionary and takes disability film analysis into the type of scholarship Snyder and Mitchell (2010) recommend when they discuss new disability documentary as a chorus of perspectives, which broaden disability representation beyond cure or death. However, again, the focus on people who elect to become disabled through self-demand amputation could be read as problematic.

This book reminded me of Paul Longmore's 2003[1987] thesis that people with disability are represented in limited ways and that it is important to show them as active and attractive to encourage audiences to accept social change. Longmore drew on Michael Wood to argue that movies allow us to consider social issues through representation. Narratives take social concerns and

rearrange them into more acceptable forms that ease our worries while normality is most often associated with sexual attractiveness. Richardson updates this simple proposition with his containment/(s)exploitation framework and applies it to a number of newer identifications. Disability studies must start to address the 'cult of contemporary beauty-ism' despite a 'good fuck' being lower on the list of needs than other disabling social issues (p. 172).

I like this book; the content is important whereas the format offers an innovative and accessible introduction to the topics under discussion. *Transgressive Bodies* by Niall Richardson examines the way hyper-muscular, fat, transsexed and disabled bodies are represented in film, media and popular culture. This clear and witty analysis of non-normative bodies reveals the ways we interpret biological signifiers within cultural regimes (p. 38). The book gave a great insight into Richardson's teaching style and while reading it I found myself wanting to attend one of his classes. This is an excellent book for both students and researchers. I will use it in my future teaching and publications.

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